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# Self-Portrait

Hong Seon Jang

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## Self-Portrait

Graduate Thesis  
Master of fine Arts  
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences  
Rochester Institute of Technology

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my thesis committee

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## Contents

Introduction	1
Background	4
A Beginning of Self-understanding	6
Thesis project: Self-portrait 2002-2003	14
Conclusion	26
Bibliography	29
Images	30
List of Plates	41

## Introduction

Individuals may alter power relationships with the spirit of resistance against society's unitary, hegemonic, disciplinary practices of power on individual bodies.

Michael Foucault, *The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom*

To define one's self is a complex phenomenon, a search for an elusive meaning that presents short, infrequent episodes of clarity within a constantly fluctuating set of conditions. Identity can never be given a simple, coherent description. It encompasses a sense of self and the different contexts within which individuality is constructed. To have a sense of oneself is to experience a moment of recognition, a confirmation of one's self-perception.

Identity can be regarded as the product of an assemblage of cultures, practices and meanings, an enduring heritage, and a set of shared traits and experiences. One's identity can be constructed through ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and class, as well as education. The way in which we define ourselves is affected by both internal and external influences, how we perceive each other, and how a society as a whole identifies groups of people. A person is constantly redefined in terms of his/her surroundings and the perception of others. For this reason one's identity is never completely one's own; it is co-dependent and interrelated with that of others and one is always rendered the object of another's gaze. This dichotomy of identity of being both subject and object is inherent to the nature of being.

In this thesis, I intend to study my own personal art history and gain a deeper understanding of how the various personal and societal influences during my relocation process to the United States affect concepts in my artwork and I will focus on seeking the recreation of the representation of my self-identity.

In an attempt to link my artwork and the concept of my subject matter, I seek to understand an association between my physical and psychological conditions by employing the concept of “mimicry,” which can be defined in different paradigms with various theoretical explanations and alternate uses. Mimicry is most often explained as resemblance, or sometimes clarified as concealment, protection or mistaken identity. “The close external resemblance of an organism to a different organism, such that it benefits from the mistaken identity, as in seeming to be unpalatable or harmful.”<sup>1</sup>

Marc D. Hauser described “mimicry” in terms of manipulation or exploitation:

Natural selection has selected for a resemblance between members of one population A and a second population B, thereby allowing one population to exploit the other.<sup>2</sup>

By playing with the concept of mimicry, I attempt to achieve a more diversified and balanced view of my own development of the art practice in relation to self-perception and social identity.

My primary aim is to investigate and analyze the ways in which my cultural identity as an Asian artist has been shaped, redefined, and recognized, and how my questions of cultural identities cannot be separated from the broader context of major

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<sup>1</sup> Webster’s English Dictionary, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Hauser, Marc D, *The Evolution of Communication* (Cambridge: A Bradford Book, The MIT Press), 1998, 271.

social, political, philosophical, and cultural exchanges under the guise of “Globalization.” However, I do not seek to cover every theoretical and sociopolitical issue corresponding to the narrow sense of perspective within a number of cultural discourses. Rather, I am working to retain implicit assumptions of my art and obtain a better understanding of my ideology in order to highlight my artistic progress.

## **Background**

Throughout its dramatic history, my mother country, Korea, a peninsula between China and Japan, has been invaded a total of 966 times because of its geographic and political positions. The most distinguishable period lies in the Japanese colonial era. Military police policy was used to control Korean speech and behavior. Japan also imposed an ethnic liquidation policy, forcing the Korean people to use the Japanese language and adopt Japanese-style names.

On August 15, 1945, Korea was liberated from Japanese occupation in a political agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Japanese were forced to surrender the southern half of the peninsula to the U.S. forces and the northern half to the Russian forces. In 1953, the division of Korea was further polarized into two nations because of the political agenda and ideological conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The continuous American military presence brought about enormous cultural repercussions from the West, which affected everyday life in South Korea in significant ways. American entertainment and objects of the Western life style became available, permeating the society.

Simultaneously, emerging nationalism in South Korea sparked rigorous education about Korean history and the political ideologies of communism and liberalism as a means to maintain and protect its own territory, language, and history. What developed is an ironic coupling of nonresistance towards the outside influences while proudly participating in the nationalistic spirit.

Growing up in a country with such a historical background profoundly influenced my artistic curiosities and led to my questioning of the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. My father, who was very westernized and a popular pop musician inspired me in various ways, which shaped my concept of work. I learned to appreciate Western art from the art books he brought me, books filled with Renaissance paintings and sculptures, impressionist paintings, surrealistic paintings and other historical art throughout the ages. At the same time, because of the patriarchic order that is typical of the Korean family, my father forced me to follow in his footsteps of religious conversion and against my will, became a Catholic. Later, at the age of 23, I entered military service for two years, mandatory for South Korean males. During that time, I was trained to assimilate. Everything was strictly disciplined. Speech, behavior, and even my way of thinking were being controlled within a limited radius of action.

These experiences led to my personal inquiry into the relationship between my identity and the history of country, religion, family, and military. It was conveyed through the work produced during my undergraduate years in Korea. I often portrayed myself in states of repressed suffering between my identity that is irresistibly repressed as a Catholic and my identity as an artist that desires to recover from irrational enforcements (figures 1,2,3).



## A Beginning of Self-understanding

The question of identification is never the affirmation of pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy—it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image.

Homi K. Bhabha, *Interrogating identity, the location of culture*

The foundation of the idea for the study of my identity was my move to the United States from South Korea. Being apart from my own group and living in a new cultural and linguistic surrounding affected the way I viewed myself and made me question all the aspects of life and knowledge I had previously accepted as the basis of my existence. While experiencing this adaptation process in private and on a social level in everyday life, my ambivalence caused me to confront a series of questions about the feelings of alienation, loneliness, and the condition of being silenced and voiceless. I felt totally lost and started asking myself the questions, “What am I?” or “Who am I?” in relation to the new environment. Howard Stein describes that a stranger faces difficulty and struggle in a new cultural and living situation because s/he is still living in part in the old and what was before.<sup>3</sup>

The first piece of artwork that I produced in the United States was entitled “The History of My Words” (figure 4). I used an old hardcover copy of *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Sigmund Freud. I opened the book to the center and glued all the pages down

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<sup>3</sup>Howard F. Stein, *Culture Change, Symbolic Object Loss, and Restitutional Process: Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought* 8, no. 3 (1985): 301-332.



to form solid blocks on either side of the spine. On the left side I carved the form of my ear. On the right I carved four rectangular holes and placed four little medical bottles into the spaces. The bottles were each filled with my private objects: hair, fingernails, photos and sewing needles. The words on the pages were scratched off or erased. A series of compound letters that were once arranged in a specific order to convey their messages and meanings to the reader were removed, so that it lost its function as a book and transformed solely into my artwork, my re-creation.

This work is the visual interpretation of my circuitous language translating system. The concept of this work reflected the elusiveness of my communication and my own culture in the process of attempting to formulate logic in a new language and my transitional usage from Korean to English. My method of learning was repetition. I repeatedly mimicked pronunciations and memorized meanings. The words would generate meanings depending on the way I juxtaposed them in various orders and I frequently realized that my mistakes resulted from attempting to deliver meanings beyond my understanding of the words, and ultimately failing to follow the rules of the language. While struggling to express myself in the new language, I would first think in Korean words, translate the meanings and the grammar structure in my mind and speak them in English. In the same way but in the reverse order, the book was stripped of its English words and transformed into an interpretation of my own artistic language. This work was profoundly significant because it was the starting point for my entire study of my cultural identities.

The various jobs I held while living in New York City brought me in contact with different people everyday. But it was not until I decided to work as a portrait artist on the

street that I was confronted with the most diversity and the most volatility amongst personalities. As I drew portraits of many people of disparate race, gender, language, and history, I became aware of being in the Other's sphere.<sup>4</sup> I consider that time of my life a transitional period in my self-identity. In Korea, there was no distinction between self and other and there was only complete fullness of understanding in terms of its unitary race, language, and culture. In the U.S., I have confronted the profound loss of an original unity, a differentiation, a merging with others. It was not unlike Lacan's psychological analysis of an infant's confusion in the first stage of knowing the idea that "other" exists.<sup>5</sup>

After moving to Rochester, New York in 2001, I decided to explore self-identity as a fundamental idea of my work. My initial response led me to create the installation entitled "1500 Pieces of Self-Portraits" (Figure 5), inspired by my experience as a portrait artist on the street in New York City. I consider the project a representation of that transitional period of my self-identity. I began "1500 Pieces of Self-Portraits" by photographing and collecting black and white portraits of male and female Korean artists. The images were digitally pixelized and blurred to make them unidentifiable as individuals. They were used to cover the walls, ceiling, and floor of the studio space and

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<sup>4</sup> "the Other: A concept used within psychoanalysis and identity theory, and within post-colonial theory, to signify ways in which members of dominant groups derive a sense of self-location partly through defining other groups as different or 'Other'. Thus, within patriarchy, the male is taken as the norm, and women as 'the Other,' that is not male. Similarly, in racist ideologies, whiteness is taken for granted, therefore blackness is seen as Other." Wells, Liz, *Photography: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1997), 294.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Lacan wrote: at first, the child who is together with an adult in front of a mirror confuses its own reflection with that of its adult companion. In the second phase the child acquires the notion of the image and understands that the reflection is not a real being. Finally, in the third stage, it realizes not only that the reflection is an image, but that the image is its own and is different from the image of the Other. Sarup, Madan, *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 8.

were a symbol of my original existence, completeness, and familiarity. An artist's easel and sketchpad were placed at the center of the space. On the blank page of the sketchpad I projected a movie of an artist's hand sketching portraits of Asian people. It played in reverse so that the completed portrait was being never drawn or erased. The room was dimly lit by five small white florescent lights, which created a somber funeral-like atmosphere. The idea of erasing the images of Asian people was a direct statement that my identity is somewhat slowly becoming forgotten, or lost, in the confusion of the Other's images in the trans-cultural move. One of the main concepts for this project was to embrace my fear of displacement from my own culture and country and the loss of my identity in an epistemological context in the process of assimilation by living in between my cultural heritage and a new cultural and ethnic surrounding. For this work, rather than writing an artist statement, I quoted Goethe's poem:

#### FOUND

I walked in the woods

All by myself,

To seek nothing,

That was on my mind.

I saw in the shade

A little flower stand,

Bright like the stars

Like beautiful eyes.

I wanted to plunk it,  
But it said sweetly:  
Is it to wilt  
That I must be broken?

I took it out  
With all its roots,  
Carried it to the garden  
At the pretty house.

And planted it again  
In a quiet place;  
Now it ever spreads  
And blossoms forth.

I re-interpreted and conceptualized this poem as a symbolic code for “1500 Pieces of Self-Portraits” to provide the link to my psychological condition of being in the Other’s sphere, living with the feelings of alienation and isolation. In my re-interpretation of this poem, I see myself as “I” and my completeness of being within a unitary race, language and culture as “a little flower”. The act of plucking the flower and separating it from its roots and environment is a comparison to my trans-cultural move. It will cause the little flower to wilt and die. My move into the Other’s sphere makes me invisible, no



longer existing as my previous complete self. The act of moving the little flower with all its roots intact symbolizes the egotistical hope to balance the displacement with some parts of the previous identity.

Although I hoped to convey my psychological state in the cultural adaptation process through Goethe's poem, and I expected that it would accurately replace my own words in a highly symbolic and encoded way, during the review people expressed confusion about the connectivity between my art piece and the poem. I realized at that moment that there is a difference between what I mean to say and what my words say and some people needed a stronger link between the visual presentation and the conceptual support. Because of the general lack of references or evidences of articulation about my artwork, I did not succeed in expressing my metaphor of its specific meanings. It occurred to me that this experience was an ironic re-enactment of the concepts in my art, one of struggle to communicate in a foreign language, the loss of meaning in translation, and the loss of identity which results, concepts that my peers did not comprehend through this work.

While working through this urgent awareness of my situation I began to shift my focus more concisely on the idea of conflict as it is experienced during the merging of incongruous subjects. I revisited the thought process of my early artwork when I was working with various states of repression within my own unitary culture and compared that power struggle to this new mental and physical place that I occupied. The idea of domination emerged once again. As I dealt with the fear of losing my identity as an Asian artist I became acutely aware of the influences of Western culture. I began to research

texts on cultural studies, which has become a central field within the arts, human activities, and other political movements.<sup>6</sup>

This awareness of losing my identity also led me to the notion of hybridity, which theoretically was the underlying motivation to create my next installation entitled “Me but Not Me” (Figure 6). The project enacted a compromise of self-understanding between Western ideology and my subjectivity. As explained in Key Concepts: “Hybridity is politicized, made contestatory, so that it embraces the subversion and challenge of division and separation. Hybridity sets different points of view against each other in a conflictual structure, which retains ‘a certain elemental, organic energy and openendedness.’ It is this potential of hybridity to reverse ‘the structures of domination in the colonial situation...’”<sup>7</sup>

In an attempt to model hybridity, I constructed a figurative plaster sculpture cast from my body. I added female body parts and photographic “skin.” To achieve an unadulterated and detailed view of human anatomy, the photographs were taken with a macro lens which deconstructed vulnerable naked bodies of various races and skin colors. The printed photos were then sliced into pieces and attached in a mosaic of gender and racial features on every part of the cast form. The sculpture was suspended from the ceiling and lit with a spot light in a darkened room, arms and legs in a stiff, non-reactive pose and face staring straight ahead. It hovered above a monitor that displayed a variety of people from all races, one at a time, close up and pixelized, presenting their race and

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<sup>6</sup> This collective term, *cultural studies*, does not directly indicate the study of culture nor a certain discipline. Rather it is a very broad and all-inclusive notion that is used to describe and study a whole range of practices from old established disciplines to new political movements. All of these cultural matters are relevant and interact in a profound way.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Ashcroft and Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 120

culture. In an attempt to accept the challenges of merging cultures I conceptualized my body as a hybrid icon and embraced the binary relationships of self/other, indigene/invader, familiar/strange.

For the third quarter walk through, I continued to use the method of adding photographic skins to figurative plaster casts for my next project titled “Rebirth” (figure 7). This work addressed my ongoing adaptation to my adopted home, new personal relationships in my life, a growing familiarity with my surroundings and the acceptance of new challenges that I was beginning to face. Just as “Me But Not Me” demonstrated a perplexing construction of genders and races, “Rebirth” evoked discomfort by creating a jarring display of my own birth from a headless, non-Asian female figure. The naked figure squats with hands clasped on her knees in mid-birth with my full-grown adult head emerging from her body. Contrast was further added to this already peculiar event by using color photographic prints on the female figure and black and white prints on the representation of myself.

My message was not so simple as to say that I was now “reborn” and a complacent member of my new environment. Rather, the work was a representation of another transitional period in my cultural inquiries. It marked a shift from the study of my cultural adaptation process to the broader subjects of the power struggles inherent in cultural identity and the impact of globalized culture upon people’s interpretation of the unfamiliar.

## Thesis project: Self-portrait 2002-2003

A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that which something begins its presenting.

Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking"

The thesis project is a continuation of my inquiries about my cultural identity and how my interpretation of others in the concepts of my art practice has been affected by the authoritative standards of art and humanities set by Western powers over the centuries. I seek to understand how the impact of the colonial exercise of power has shaped the European knowledge and opinions of non-Western cultures and laid the groundwork for a globalized cultural ideology.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to clarify, and indeed emphasize, that my attention for this project should not be attributed to a concern with only my antagonism of a globalized Western ideology. Nor is my work, in an attempt to elaborate, to devalue Western art history. It is a carefully considered act of negotiation in which I worked to obtain further understanding of my ambivalence between my assimilation process and resistance toward the dominant culture by examining and enriching my perspective through an analysis of the relationship between my body and others, my personal history and cultural ideology.

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<sup>8</sup> Donald Preziosi, The art of art history was thus simultaneously the instrument of an Enlightenment universalist vision of humanity, and a means for fabricating qualitative distinctions between individuals and societies. Donald Preziosi, *Performing the body/ performing the text* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 30.



One of the central ideas for this show was to adapt and “play” with the concept of the colonial code and the representation of mimicry by reversing the roles between subject and object or surveyor and surveyed. In an attempt to authorize myself with power and exercise that power to control and reposition my social role as an observer of “the Other,” rather than observed as “the Other,” my aim was to recognize and then redefine the meaning of my cultural identity.<sup>9</sup>

Photography has played a significant role in the production of “otherness” for the past century. Through the appropriation of colonialist practice which focused on collections of visual records of colonized peoples, I utilized photography to perform this concept of discovery or observation that claims to be able to create objective, “scientific” records, free from the bias of human imagination.

I considered that my photographic sculptural approach might not be fully regarded as photography in general because I refused to take the conventional role of documentary photography. Nevertheless, I utilized one of the most important functions of photography, considering it as an objective tool for mimetic code that describes the real world due to its scientific accuracy.

The first plan to assist the main idea was to represent gallery space as the site of my personal museum where I could display objects as evidence of my personal collections which convey the constant, active re-creation of self-recognition in order to gain a more complex understanding of the change in self-perception and social identity brought about by the process of the relocation. In order to support my plan for the show, I

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, “The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power.” Foucault, ‘Body /Power’ and ‘Truth and Power,’ in ed. C Gordon Michel Foucault, *Power/ Knowledge* (U.K.: Harvester, 1980), 52.

borrowed the complex role of the museum as a place of education serving a colonizing force in determining aesthetic value for the epic intention of the civilizing mission.

The museum takes on the role of historian by collecting the products of various societies. It is the knowledgeable museum that makes a thorough investigation of culture or a relic of human activity as well as upholds a characteristic of an encyclopedia. The museum is a place of education.<sup>10</sup>

Adapting the long-term controversy in Western art history between sculptural perfection and photographic reality, I combined the two visual manifestations of sculpture and photography to represent lifelikeness.

Great artists were praised for imitating nature so perfectly as to deceive humans and animals, and the sculptor Pygmalion's ivory statue was suitable to be transformed into a real woman. The striving for ideal perfection was always to be combined with lifelikeness. Once, however, photography was able to take lifelikeness literally, it revealed more clearly the inherent imperfection of physical appearance.<sup>11</sup>

I determined to employ the same photographic sculptural approach for the thesis project as I did the previous school years as acknowledgement of delivering the effect of reality in perception, representation, and the accurate physical measurement of the body.

For the first series of work, "The Heads" (figures 8, 9), the main idea was to derive a sense of self-location through defining other groups as different or "the Other." I

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<sup>10</sup> Yves Michaud, "L'art contemporain et le musée: un bilan" *Le Cahiers: Du Musée National d'art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou- The contemporary art and Museum*. 1989, 76-81.

<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *The Two Authenticities of the Photographic Media*. *Leonardo*, Vol.30, No. 1 (1997): 53-55.

carefully photographed and collected images of heads with a variety of skin, eye, and hair color from all different racial groups of people around me. I constructed the inner core of the heads with insulation foam and wrapped them with the detailed images that directly and immediately represented the subjects' cultural and social condition. In addition, I collected their personal information such as race, gender, name, age, ethnicity, nationality, and color of skin and eyes. There were no personal relationships between the models and me, there was only a strict objectifying method of collecting and categorizing information of human form rather than as individuals. Overall, this investigation process resembled the practice of typological photography for scientific study of the construction of racial types in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in its attempt to use body features as empirical evidence of human character.<sup>12</sup>

In an attempt to understand the evidence of how I perpetually recognize differences between different groups of people in terms of physical structures and colors of appearance, I as a surveyor objectified and examined human faces and heads of all races by the act of deconstructing and reconstructing the images of facial features of others.

In my next work entitled "Understanding Female Body, Series I (Jennifer) " (figure 10,11), I attempted to achieve a discerning perception on the thinly disguised version of beauty that had been encoded through history under the influences of colonial forces by more precisely studying the white female body which had been classified as an ideal of higher beauty.

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<sup>12</sup> Fusco and Wallis, "Typological systems depended on the widespread contemporary interest in the body, especially the head, silhouettes, portrait daguerreotypes, and phrenology all directed special attention to the shape, size, or character of the head as a record of individuality" Fusco and Wallis, *Only Skin Deep changing visions of the American self* (New York: Harry N Abrahams, 2003), 174.

Physical beauty of the ancient Greek accounted for the excellence of their art.

The ancient Egyptian and African, by comparison, had been handicapped by their own physical appearance, “which lacked the features that could stimulate the artist through an ideal of higher beauty.”<sup>13</sup>

The model, Jennifer, was a perfect example for this study. She is of European descent, half Italian and half English, 20 years old, with brunette hair, green eye color, 5-feet 11-inches tall, 150 pounds, and she is in the perfect proportion in terms of the Western standard of beauty. I positioned her naked body lying down on the table in the middle of the studio space and I photographed her with a total of approximately 500 shots obtaining extremely detailed images of her entire body from all different angles. In the process of printing, juxtaposing, sizing, cropping, and piecing together the detailed images over a molded form of her body, I found that her body contained the traces of her personal empirical history through her tattoo, skin rash, scars, unbalanced breast size, deformed finger nails, and unbalanced lengths of her legs that presumably have been shaped over the years (figures 12,13,14). Merleau-Ponty remarks that “a thing has ‘characteristics’ or ‘properties’ which are stable, even if they do not entirely serve to define it, and we propose to approach the phenomenon of reality by studying perceptual constants.”<sup>14</sup>

In my early work note of this project, I wrote:

As I get closer to the model with the macro lens, the more I somehow lose the identification imagery of her entire body. Very interestingly, at that point I can only get fragmented images of her body such as hair, pores, acne, rash, finger

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<sup>13</sup> Winckelmann paraphrased in Hugh Honour, *The image of Black in Western Art*, vol.4. Pt. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989),14.

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The thing and the nature world: Phenomenology of perception* (London: Routledge, 1945), 348.



nails, eyes, lips, nose, ears, navel, nipples, teeth, genitals, etc. There are no more images of the whole, only partial, and no clue for her personal identity without the whole, but only her racial characteristics with color and shapes of features. Now the most fundamental questions of all for myself are “what is what I see?” and “what I am searching for?”

Such an act of engagement of studying and looking at particular body images, the process of identifying “the Other” by physical characteristics, helped me to structure the logic of my own corporeal identity in relation to my racial classification.<sup>15</sup>

In my second piece of “ Understanding Female Body” series (figure 15), I employed a model named Julie who is also of European descent, half German and half Irish, 21years old, with Brunette hair, brown eye color, 5-feet 9-inches tall, and 165 pounds. The model was a little oversized in terms of standard beauty and she had unusual stretch marks on her abdomen from an early pregnancy. I immediately utilized her unusually prominent feature that exclusively represented the tactile surface of the human body (figures 16, 17). I constructed the torso figure without limbs in order to obtain the principal focus only on her abdomen and its distinguishing feature rather than get distracted by the rest of her body. The torso figure is 36 inches in height and life-sized which enhanced or appeared to enhance or somewhat exaggerated distortions of her body.

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<sup>15</sup> Fusco and Wallis, “ The process of identifying another person by superficial physical characteristics structured the logic of racial classification”. Fusco and Wallis, *Only Skin Deep changing visions of the American self*, 178.

By further investigating the external entity of the white female body with the camera, I empowered myself to understand the intrinsic relationship between dominant culture and various forms of power, and how Western ideology has shaped the way I conceive the concept of beauty of body.<sup>16</sup>

For my next series of works, I decided to explore the concept of the representation of difference by mimicking the posture of western iconic sculptures and displacing my self-image into them. Because Michelangelo's David is one of the most prominent icons in Western art history, which portrays what is perceived as perfection of human form and beauty, it was, for me, the most obvious piece in which to begin this new series (figure 18). I found it to be appropriate for this concept of self-recognition in the aspect of cultural study. Donald Preziosi outlined what "art," "art history," and "museum" had become in terms of the fabrication and maintenance of European aesthetic principles as "universal principles of good design or standard beauty:"

Art was the complementary (civilized) foil to its implicit and imaginary obverse, that enigma of the Enlightenment, the (uncivilized) fetish. It was a powerful instrument for legitimizing the belief that what you see in what you make is what in some deep, essential way you truly 'are,' the form of your work being the physiognomy of your truth. At the same time, it provided a powerful instrument for making plausible the proposition that Europe was the brain of earth's body, and that all outside the edifice of Europe constituted its prologue. Of course that

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<sup>16</sup> "To photograph is in some ways to appropriate the object being photographed. It is a power/knowledge relationship. To have visual knowledge of an object is in part to have power, even if only momentarily over it. Photography tames the object of the gaze, the most striking example being of exotic culture". John Urry, *The tourist gaze* (UK: SAGE, 1990), 139.

external anterior, that Other, was the necessary support and defining instance of what constituted its presence.<sup>17</sup>

I constructed a 3-foot high photographic sculpture of my self-portrait mimicking David's posture (*almost the same, but not quite*) with photo images of my body in which I manipulated the natural color of skin to obtain a more dramatic likeness to the color of yellow, which is the color of Asian in ethnical classification (figure 19, 20). One of the main concepts for this work was to adapt and play with the idea of mimicking colonial viewpoints and practices through significant revision or re-inscription. The process of mimicking or displacing David was my oppositional approach to the superiority of beauty. It manifests my questions as to how a fixed framework of social and cultural meaning such as cultural icons firmly sustains and perpetuates control of the global culture where our lives, goods, knowledge, and beliefs readily flow across national boundaries.<sup>18</sup>

I utilized and conceptualized myself as the visible body (skin color, hair) and as cultural signifier that directly represents my encoded cultural and social condition. I intentionally exercised an aggressive and disruptive imitation process by replacing this iconic figure and practiced mimicry as the symbol of interfering and ridiculing to reveal the narcissistic authority of David's representative role of the superiority of beauty

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<sup>17</sup> Donald Preziosi, *Performing the body/ performing the text*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Homi K. Bhabha outlined that Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is *almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, and its difference....Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers. Homi K. Bhabha, *'of mimicry and man: The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 86.



metonymically. By doing so I embraced the power relationships of cultural forms of Own and Other, of Occident and Orient.<sup>19</sup>

Another piece that mimicked Michelangelo's work for this series was "Self-portrait as Jesus Christ" (figure 22). I borrowed the form from one of Michelangelo's well-known unfinished work, "Rondanini Pieta" (figure 21). The original figure was made in accentuation of the theme of the intimate union between Mother and Son (figure 21). However, I intentionally, unemployed Mother Mary struggling with dignity to hold her dead son, and replaced Jesus Christ with my body, in order to elucidate my concept by removing the original context and imposing new meaning of self-isolation to reform this iconic masterpiece. I reinterpreted this religious icon by mimicking the oppression of colonial subjects partially caused from the role Christianity played as a form of social control.<sup>20</sup> In trying to conceptualize my body as Jesus Christ, I investigated how the dominant religion of the world, Roman Catholicism, used the vehicle of colonial power to disseminate its doctrine through a process of moral reform that collided with Art and ultimately affected my fundamental concepts of living.

However, during the process of developing the thesis work, as I assembled all the complex ideas and evidences of aesthetic standards set by dominant powers, I realized that using the form of "Rondanini Pieta" to reveal a method of social control of colonial subjectivity seemed inappropriate because there was no evidence of hidden intention of the artist to manifest power or propound an ideal of Western beauty from this work. The

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<sup>19</sup> In postcolonial discourse, Graham Huggan described mimicry as disruptive imitation, which has the purpose of interfering, ridiculing or subordinating the subject under imitation. Huggan, Graham, (*Post colonialism, anthropology, and the magic of mimesis: Cultural Critique*, 1997, 38:91–106.

<sup>20</sup> Homi K. Bhabha attempts to show how for religious reform was uncompromisingly used to produce a knowledge of Christianity and a sense of personal identity along Christian lines as a form of social control of colonial subjectivity in India by quoting Charles Grant's 'Observations on the state of society among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain' (1792) as the most influential early nineteenth-century account of Indian manners and morals. Homi K. Bhabha, '*of mimicry and man*,' *The Location of Culture*, 87.



artist's subject only imbued religious sensitivity of great depth and the pathos of death. Whether the story of Jesus Christ portrays an allegorical figure based on mythology or a religious figure of the "Son of God" who traveled around Galilee with followers, was condemned by the Jews, and crucified by the Romans according to the Bible, this work only represents this artist's devoted intent to convey his aesthetic interpretation of the intensity of death, in the sense of "breaking with the body" that attains the "form" by removing the excess stone.

This was a significant experience for me. Pondering the subject matter of death helped me to open more fluidly a new perception of myself as well as the Other. Indeed, contemplating life and death has been a major subject matter of human study throughout every culture and human history, one that all of humankind can share equally beyond any knowledge, ideology, history, culture, and any differences. The fundamental concept of my investigation for the art practice is to understand the questions "Who am I?" or "What am I?" which are linked to all phenomena that my own physical body perceives from being in the world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote:

The body is our anchorage in a world.<sup>21</sup> ...I experience my own body as power of adapting certain forms of behaviour and a certain world; and I am given to myself merely as a certain hold upon the world; now, it is precisely my body which perceives the body of another, and discovers in that other body a miraculous prolongation of my own intentions, a familiar way of dealing with the world.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The spatiality of one's own body and mobility: Phenomenology of perception* (London: Routledge, 1945), 167.

<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty. *The thing and the nature world: Phenomenology of perception*, 412.

In the process of knowing myself with this new recognition, I began to realize that, since the beginning of this thesis, I have only highlighted the logical investigation of my self-identity in relation to corporeal phenomena of the world around me that depends solely on rational perception. I became aware that my study has not examined how an incarnate subject is in a position to undertake actions that transcend the surface, the organic level of the body. As a result, I began to consider myself as a metaphysical existence in a visual analysis of the body.

This awareness of myself in an ontological point of view continued in my next experimental installation work entitled “Dead Deer” (figure 23, 24) inspired by witnessing the death of a deer killed by a car. When I confronted this tragic incident, I immediately came up with a conceptual connectivity between the death of the innocent animal being apart from its own group and my personal displacement process. It was the very experience of transcendence that provoked my self-knowing process in relation to the world phenomena because the question is always how do we become open to understanding phenomena that transcend human knowledge. Although I do not manage to encompass the contemplation of my death in every moment, I nevertheless live, in general, in an atmosphere of thought where the essence of death is always on the horizon. Discovering the death of the deer being apart from its own group and killed by a car accident is not unlike the act of plucking the flower and separating it from its roots and environment. I see myself in the little flower and the deer, physical evidence of the body as a general medium for having a world. And yet, the question about my self-identity became very obscure within this greater question about the meaning of knowledge of

world phenomena in relation to the Other when confronted with losing physical existence.

I may seem to have something in life but, in reality I have nothing, since my having, possessing, controlling an object is only a transitory moment in the process of living.

## Conclusion

Post structuralist thinking opposes the notion that a person is born with a fixed identity....It suggests instead that identities are floating, that meaning is not fixed and universally true at all times for all people, and that the subject is constructed through the unconscious in desire, fantasy and memory.

David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall *Critical Decade*

It was my primary concern to investigate and analyze the ways in which my identity has been shaped, redefined, and recognized by others during my relocation process into a new culture, and as a result to represent my disagreement with the social condition in which I was placed. While I retraced my personal art history during this self-recognition process, I have been solely focused on the concept of the Other in terms of a dichotomous perspective of good and evil, Western and Eastern, all or nothing, dominant and dominated. From the beginning I placed the role of Western as dominant and Eastern as dominated thematically for this paper and it was my conviction that my trans-cultural move was the reason for my first experience of being in the Other's sphere. However, at the end of this study I understand that my awareness of otherness and the experience of oppression by others began with my personal history of enforcements placed upon me by my own father, military, and country prior to my relocation.

By playing with role reversals, my study dealt with the refusal, subversion or re-negotiation of the enforcement of ideals focused on Western art. The Westerner's gaze towards the Other is certainly one way in which our body images are standardized, re-



interpreted, identified, and classified and it is well documented in hundreds of years' worth of museum relics. It is a human tendency throughout human history inside and outside all ethnic groups that oversimplifies and standardizes the differences of others with blends of false information, biases, rationalizations, and prejudices on classification based on the various ideologies of concepts of life in order to maintain and emphasize the dominance of one over another.

As I photographed the details of human anatomy of my body and others I looked closely at the physical differences on the surface. While immersed in the process of deconstructing and reconstructing the details of body images I was seeing all the political ideologies and cultural conflicts embedded within the racial characteristics from a long human history of racial classifications. The repetition of looking for the physical differences began to desensitize my view as more people sat in front of my lens. I began to see beyond the surface level, which essentially made the differences less significant. It was like I was seeing the same body with varieties in color, shape and size. Yet it is this physical form that holds so much weight in determining our role in this life.

We present ourselves, our knowledge, our ideologies through our bodies and we are judged and identified through our physical existence. No matter what we are, Westerner or Easterner, male or female, Christian or Buddhist, black, white, or yellow, it is our body, the physical evidence for having a world, which perceives the body of another. It then reflexes our social and cultural condition, creating the power to adapt certain forms of thesis and antithesis from the world phenomena. Within the process of identification there exist only our conscious motivations, ideas, and beliefs with which we judge and categorize different groups of people.

Although it is almost impossible to entirely change our perspective of each other, this project helped me to open up to the new perception and penetrate through the surface, in order to arrive at the roots of understanding the complex relationship between my self-identity and others without the limitation of judgment inherent in human existence. Furthermore, a great deal of what I have learned in this study is to embrace the fear of differences with the greater subject of life as a transitory substance on an ontological level and to finally experience a whole new perception of synthesis for my art practice. It is also the philosophy of the Buddha that there is no room in Buddhist thought for the concept of any enduring permanent substance, neither things nor the self. Nothing is real but the processes of knowing what you are.

It is my hope not only to be a spectator but to be involved in the world phenomena and it is my acceptance and involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception.<sup>23</sup> And I also hope that my questions “who am I?” or “what am I?” will continue to help me find a way of freeing myself from the limitation and to grasp the keen balance of objectivity of myself through my art practice so that I may approach truth ever more closely for every moment of my journey.

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<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of perception*, 304

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## Images



fig.1



fig. 2





fig. 3



fig. 4

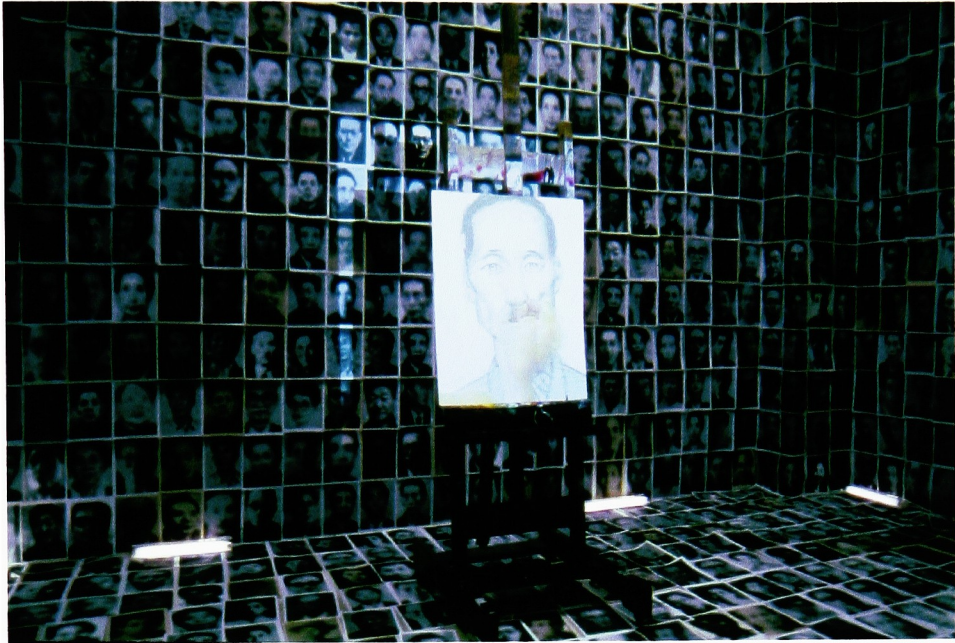


fig. 5

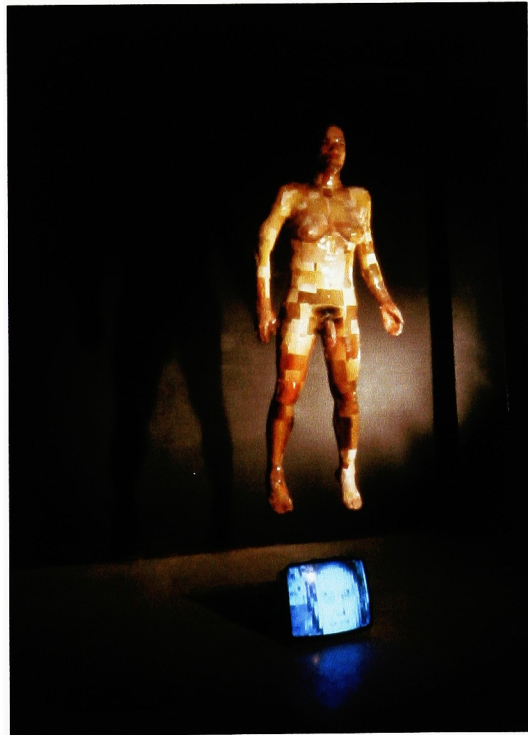


fig. 6



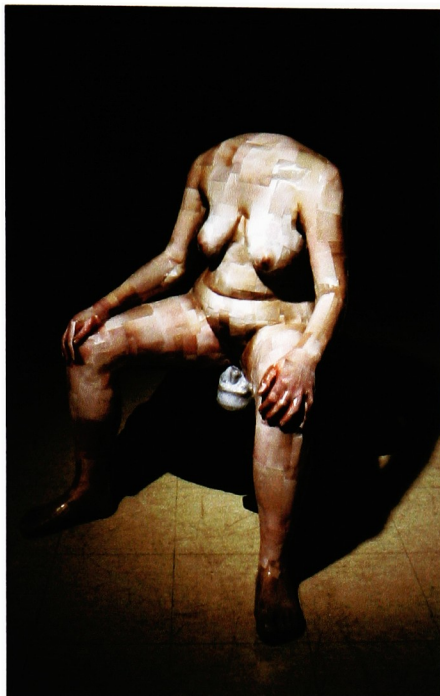


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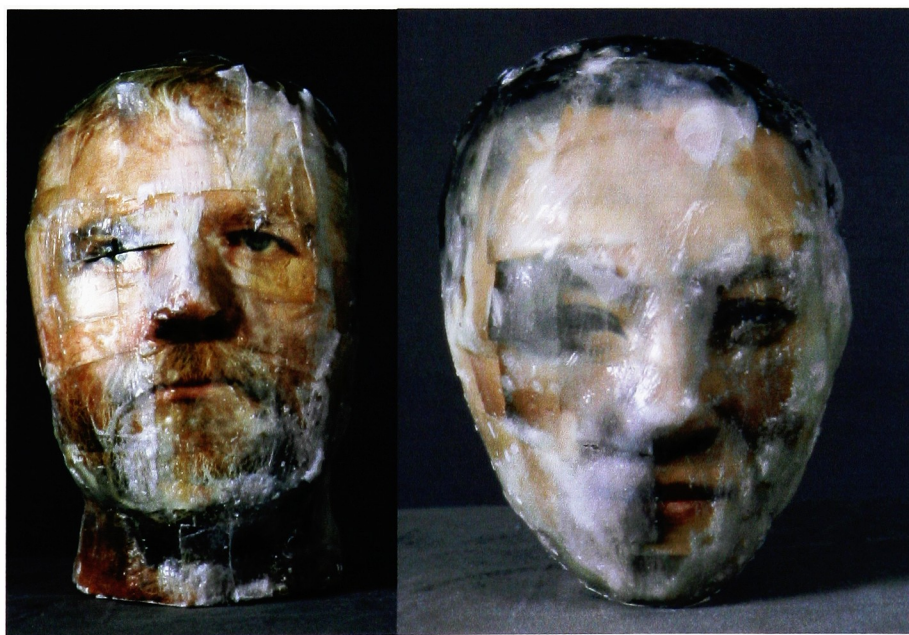


fig. 8,9

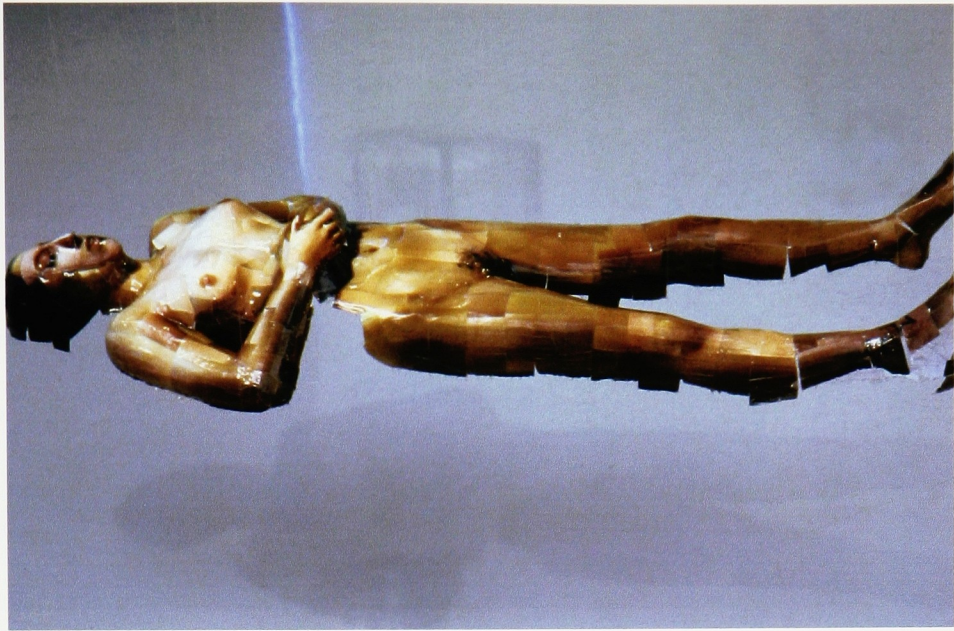


fig. 10

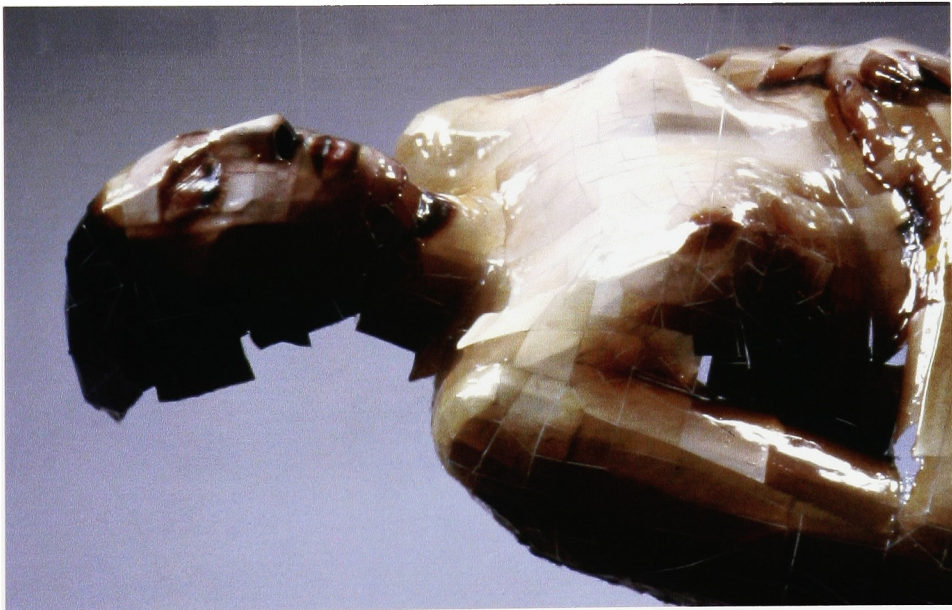


fig. 11





fig. 12

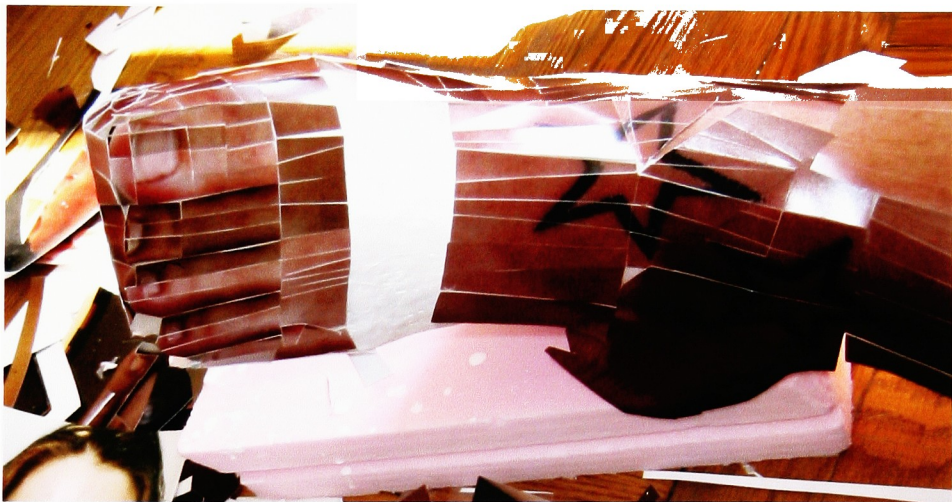


fig. 13

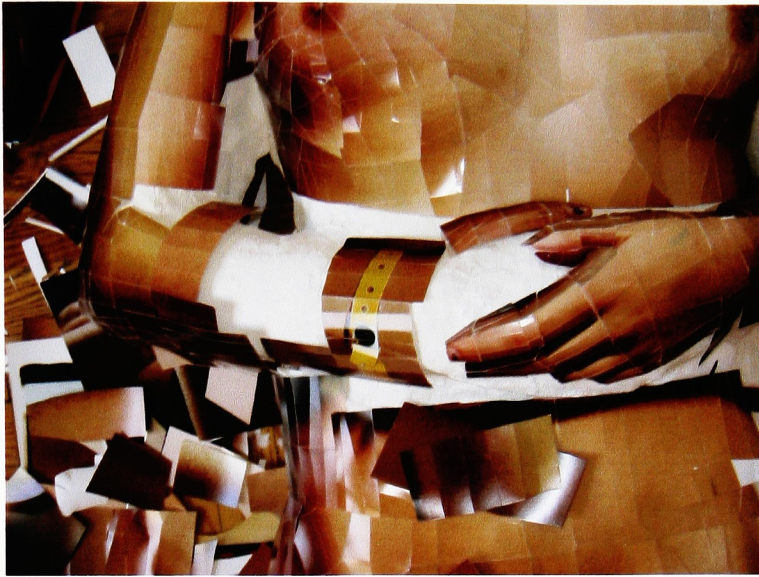


fig. 14



fig. 15





fig. 16



fig. 17

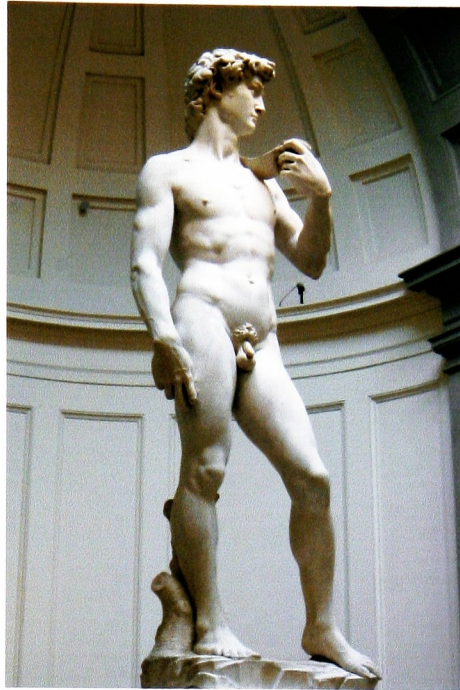


fig. 18

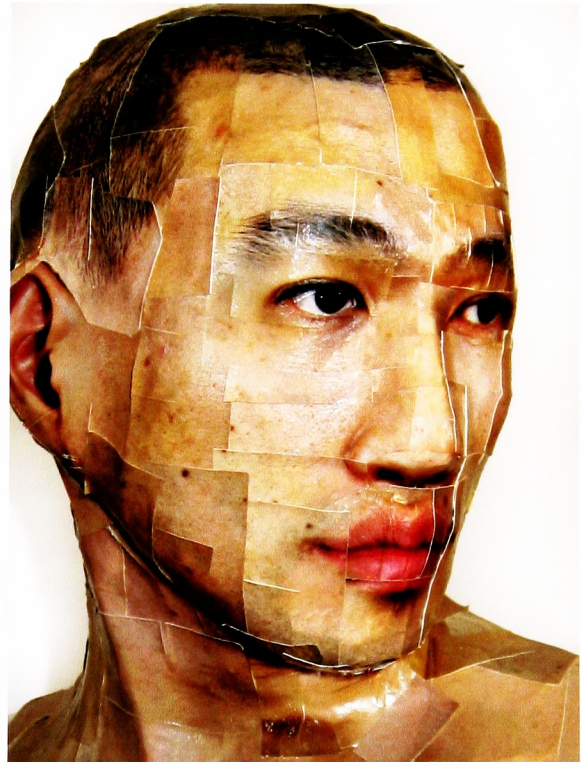
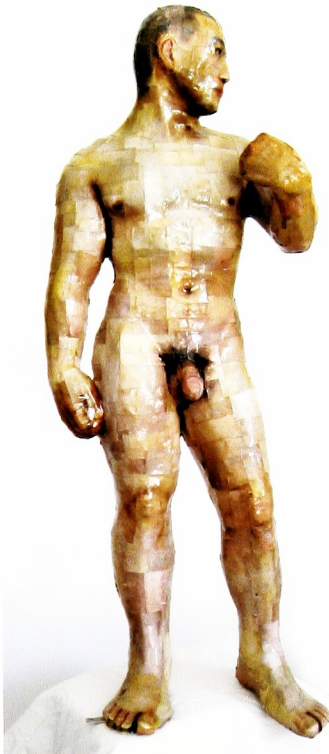


fig. 19, 20

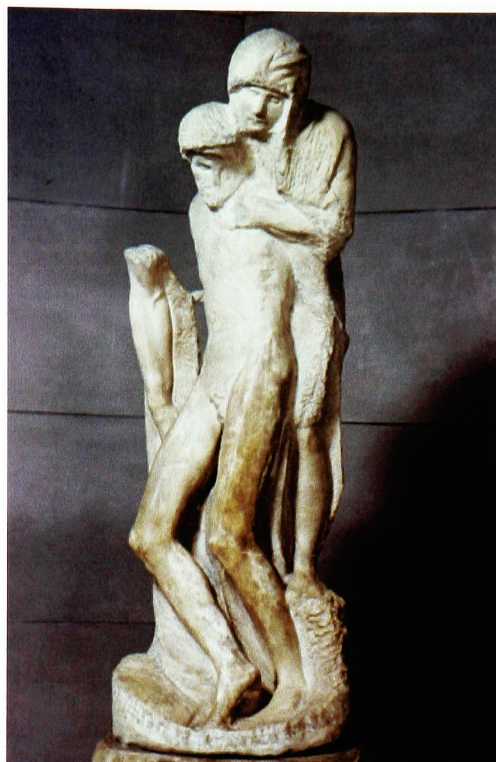


fig. 21

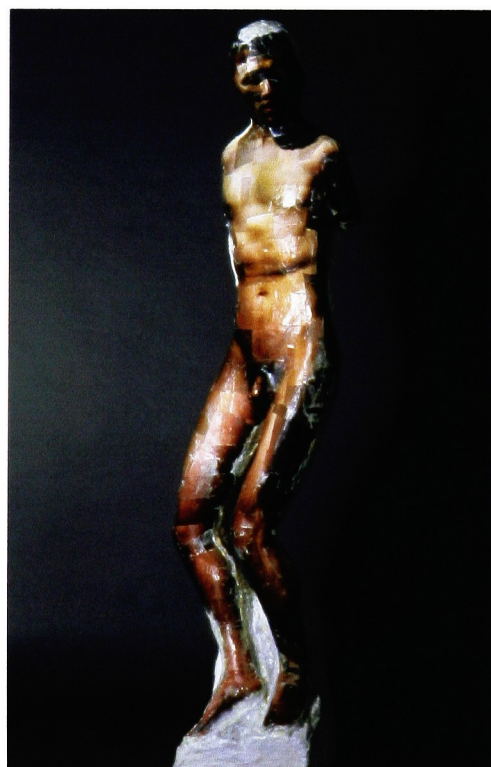


fig. 22



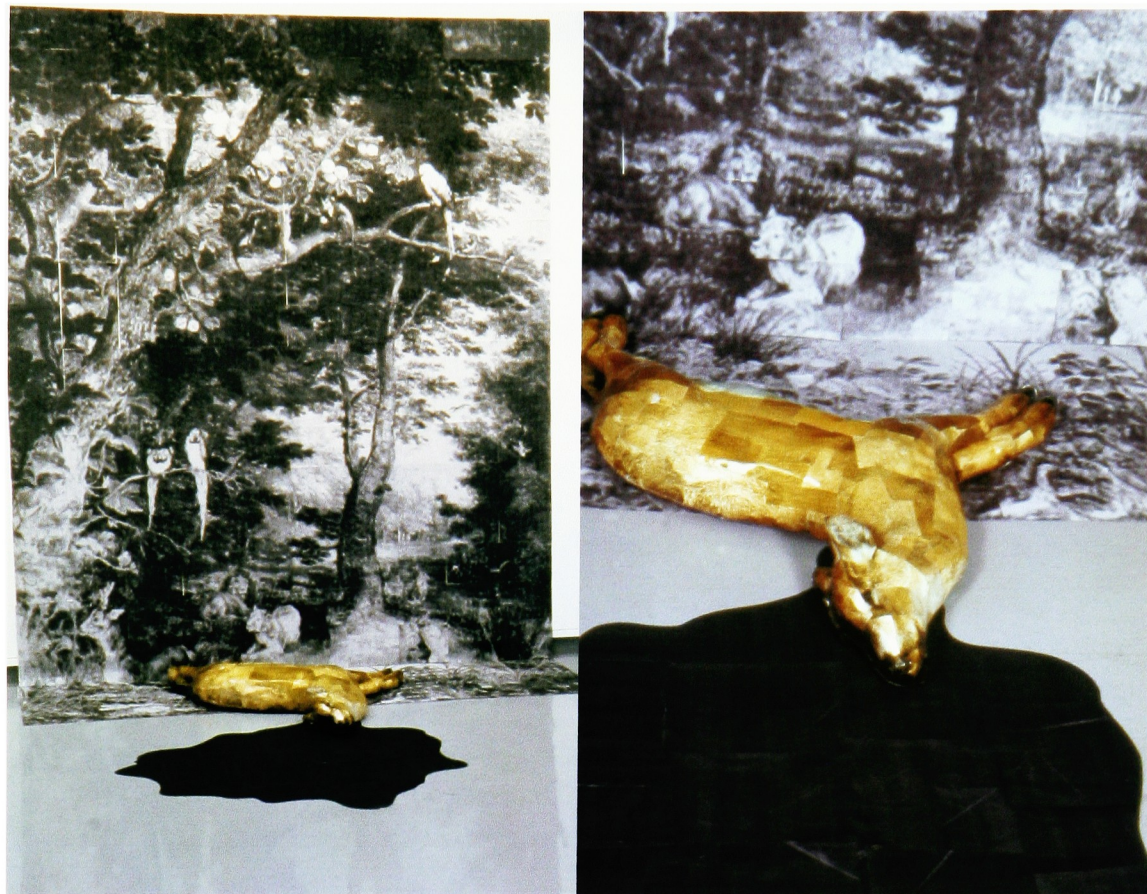


fig. 23, 24

## List of Plates

- Figure 1. Dream, pillow, bees wax, artist's hair, thread, 26 x 16 x 6 in, 1999.
- Figure 2. Pond, mixed mediums, 92 x 74 in, 1998.
- Figure 3. Silver river, mixed mediums, 60 x 44 in, 1997.
- Figure 4. The History of My Words, mixed mediums, 11x 9 in, 1999.
- Figure 5. 1500 pieces of self-portrait, mixed mediums, 92 x 74 in, 2001.
- Figure 6. Me but not Me, mixed mediums, dimension variable, 2001.
- Figure 8. Rebirth, mixed mediums, 36 x 28 x 26 in, 2001.
- Figure 9. Heads (Kenyon), insulation foam, photos, bee's wax, 60 x 44 in, 2002.
- Figure 10. Heads (Moon), insulation foam, photos, bee's wax, 8 x 11 in, 2002.
- Figure 11. Understanding female body (Jennifer), photos, resin, 73 x 28 in, 2002.
- Figure 12. Understanding female body (Detail)
- Figure 13. Understanding female body (Detail)
- Figure 14. Understanding female body (Detail)
- Figure 15. Understanding female body (Julie), photos, resin, 40 x 28 in, 2002.
- Figure 16, 17. Understanding female body (Detail)
- Figure 18. David, Michelangelo.
- Figure 19,20. Self-Portrait as David, photos, resin, plaster, 30 x 14 in, 2002.
- Figure 21. Rondanini Pieta, Michelangelo.
- Figure 22. Self-Portrait as Jesus Christ, photos, bee's wax, insulation form,  
73 x 28 in, 2002.
- Figure 23, 24. Dead Deer, mixed mediums, dimensions variable, 2002